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Melodies of Mourning. Music & Emotion in Northern Australia

By **Fiona Magowan.**

Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2007

Pp: xvii + 222

Price:

To start for once with the conclusion: this is an excellent anthropological work that explores how in a fully functioning Aboriginal society a sensory awareness of the environment shapes an ancestral cosmology of song and sentiments and how these cultural performances are understood in a Christian context.

Although Fiona Magowan explains that the focus of her book is on women's funeral laments, a ritual genre in which emotions are expressed in so called women's crying songs, the subjects she deals with are much wider.

Taking these women's crying songs as a starting point she investigates a broad spectrum of themes that go beyond this specific subject: the place of ecology in Yolngu music; the difficult to grasp concept of emotion; how sensory awareness of the landscape and seascape is expressed and experienced through this poetic genre, how ancestral knowledge is transmitted and finally how ancestral song is understood and experienced in Christian contexts.

Thus her study presents, first, a particular cultural system of music and dance that is based on a sensory relationship within a sentient ancestral landscape and, second, explores the dynamic encounter of this cultural system with Christian ontology.

Magowan basically develops her arguments along three key-concepts that prove to be useful vehicles for understanding the central themes in her book.

The first is *enskilment*, a term applied to the singers' ability to image and bring forth sounds and images of the natural and ancestral world in song - a bodily exercise that includes sensory and emotive effects; understandings of the normative rules of gendered activity, elementary understandings of the natural environment and kinship relations to land. It is, as Magowan explains, not just a matter of learning to sing... 'it is a process of knowing how to feel for and sing through country' (p.69). In their songs and ritual performances Yolngu work as it were through the colours, sounds, smells, tastes and movement of the landscape, thus making and remaking places and country meaningful. Magowan demonstrates how this musical ability is learned and generational by transmitted by analyzing the way children's musical learning socializes boys and girls.

To understand this dynamic connection between the singers, ancestors and places the author combines the words human and ancestor into a creative new term: *hum-an-cestal*. This second key-concept conveys the intrinsic relation between persons with all nonhuman beings. In her chapter *Embodying Ancestors* she considers how personhood becomes embedded in and arises out of ecological

elements by singing with names. Naming for example a person as an ancestor '...establishes an intimate relation with its form that forever after holds the memories of those living' (p. 131). With her thorough analysis of Shark songs and Water song Magowan convincingly demonstrates what it means when a Yolngu sings 'I am the Shark' or 'I am the Water'.

But how do Yolngu experience the relationship between ancestral law, where persons-ancestors-places are interconnected, and Christianity? In Northern Arnhem Land Aborigines have been under missionary influence since early last century and many Yolngu have become Christians. Magowan asks what kinds of flow experiences occur when Christianity with central themes such as redemption and reconciliation, influences ancestral logic based on locality and ancestral dispositions? How do two religious systems with very different narratives and symbols make sense at the same time? Based on the interpretations of her teacher Murukun - a woman acclaimed for ancestral knowledge who was also a practising Christian - the author borrows the theological concept of *perichoresis*. This originally Greek term describes the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The way Murukun interpreted the presence of these elements in her crying-songs resonates strongly with the meaning of *perichoresis*. As in ancestral logic where persons, places, and ancestors are seen to dwell inside the other as well as each having their own independent domains, so is Trinity both a single concept and a reference to three indwelling entities. Again Magowan illustrates these points by a thorough analysis of songs, this time Aboriginal Christian songs. She rejects the rather static term syncretism for this process as it tends to focus on forms, systems and products of merger whereas her choice of the concept *perichoresis* (literally meaning 'dancing around', implying circulatory movements) is a metaphor for the dynamics of religious unification.

With these basic concepts as helpful analytical tools Magowan not only presents a rich analysis of the gendered aspects of Yolngu music and dance, but also of the anthropology of emotions, of the song's politicization through specific attachments to place and clan identities and of Yolngu expressions of Christianity. She obtained her material during long time in-depth research in Yolngu communities that made her both observant and participant with a certain status and role. Throughout the book she presents very relevant information on her ambiguous position as researcher and the problem of ethnographic learning and representation.

Clifford Geertz once said that an important aim of Anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse: understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity '... it renders them accessible' (The Interpretation of Culture, 1973:14). Fiona's Magowan's book is a fine example of these ideals.

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The Power of Perspective: social ontology and agency on Ambrym, Vanuatu.

By **Knut Rio.**

Berghahn: Berghahn Books

2007

Since the foundation of the discipline, the central Vanuatu island of Ambrym has held a very special place in the anthropological imagination, and *The Power of Perspective* rightly celebrates this. From W H R Rivers' *The History of Melanesian Society* (1914, University of Cambridge Press) onwards, the vagaries of the Ambrymese's seemingly anomalous social and ceremonial forms have for decades both delighted and eluded scholars of kinship, exchange and ritual, and have even piqued the interest of continental philosophers. Perhaps the most important and memorable moment in this legacy is A B Deacon's description of a conversation that took place between himself and a sadly unnamed 'native informant,' appropriately, for northern Vanuatu, over a diagram made of stones and sand. The dizzying incorporation of tripartite relations across a spiraling form that emerges from this image provides Rio with a starting point for his reexamination of exchange, social ontology and agency in Ambrym.

Like Trobriand Islands *kula* exchange – although somewhat less famously – for that period during the 1960s and 1970s when kinship studies and exchange 'systems' were all the rage, Ambrym sociality became so thoroughly abstracted from its anthropological setting that it no longer resembled in any obvious way the dynamic social world from whence it had been extracted. Indeed the incident described above – or at least Deacon's description of it – seems to have taken on a life of its own. This has included, somewhat surprisingly, becoming embroiled within a somewhat rarified but nevertheless important debate between Claude Lèvi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre concerning reciprocity, agency and 'thirdness.' As well as richly describing the disembodied social life of Ambrymese 'social form' within the ivory towers of the European academy, this debate is also of crucial importance to Rio's analysis. Indeed, through rubbing dense ethnography against theories of exchange, agency and social process, it is Rio's task to reconnect these worlds, and to thus resume that conversation between Ambrym and the Western academy that began with Deacon and his Ambrymese interlocutor all those years ago.

In exploring chapter-by-chapter what are familiar anthropological territories for Vanuatu – such as kinship and marriage, gardening practices, the male 'graded society', funerary and circumcision ceremonies – Rio develops a complex argument concerning the importance of 'third parties' to more ostensibly dyadic relations of exchange, and to social reproduction more generally. However, it is not simply the case that these third parties impose their agency over the relationships of others, like police directing traffic. Rather, Rio's analysis goes beyond a simplistic understanding of power as control through encom-

passment, and instead tracks its oscillations across shifting levels of perspective, from male status hierarchies, kinship and gender dynamics, to colonial and neo-colonial relations. This complexly nuanced exploration of the shifting dynamics of power and perspective not only provides the book with its title, but also its major strength.

Since the publication of R. H. Codrington's *The Melanesians* (1891, Oxford: Clarendon Press), researchers of Vanuatu have produced a rich body of anthropological and historical scholarship. Sadly, in highlighting the debate between Sartre and Lèvi-Strauss, as well as the geographically distant ethnography of Papua New Guinea, more recent contributions within this important body of thought and literature seem to have fallen through the cracks of Rio's ethnography. Indeed, the important work of Mary Patterson, who thoroughly explored Ambrym kinship, exchange and history through long-term fieldwork in the 1970s, and in subsequent research, receives scant attention. For this reviewer, at least, a deeper engagement with this body of literature would have added significantly to the book. It is also a shame that such an ambitious work should be so sorely marred by the countless typographical errors that occur throughout the text. This is attributed to very poor copy-editing on the part of the publishers.

As the first ethnographic monograph of Ambrym to find its way to publication, *The Power of Perspective* is to be highly recommended, particularly to students and scholars of Melanesian anthropology and to theoreticians of ritual agency and exchange. Rio's treatment of exchange, ritual process and social form are highly sophisticated, and I have no doubt that his development of the theory of 'thirdness' will prove to be of enduring value to the discipline.

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Michael Riley: Sights Unseen

Edited by **Brenda Croft.**

National Gallery of Australia 2007

Hardcover 176 pages

You just really keep your eyes open and look for things that other people don't see. You just see things and then take the picture. Michael Riley

It's an unusual privilege to be asked to review a catalogue of a major multi-media exhibition for a journal such as *Oceania*. Of course, in this case the reason can only be that Michael Riley is one of Australia's most high profile Aboriginal artists. But surely, I wonder, as I unwrap the book from its bubble-wrapped packaging, isn't it exactly because it is *art*—rather than archival record, ethnographic documentation, or indigenous media—that Riley's work must be considered for the way it transcends the limitations and expectations imposed by the very category 'indigenous artist'.

Or does it? Should it? Can it? As it turns out,

the contributors to this book would insist that Riley's work—and his talent for seeing and recording sights that fall outside others' fields of vision—cannot be abstracted from the context of the lives, relationships and socio-political histories that infuse the frames.

Celebrated photographer, filmmaker and visual artist, Riley was born in 1960 in Dubbo and spent the first five years of his life on Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve in central western NSW. As this book chronicles, Riley's talent flourished when he moved to Sydney in the late 1980s and took part in the surge of creativity and political activism of the indigenous arts scene in Sydney in the following two decades. Perhaps best known for his *cloud* series of photographs, which includes the memorable image of a cow placidly suspended in a sky of pink tinged clouds, and the film *Empire*, commissioned for the Festival of the Dreaming Program of the Sydney Olympics, Riley worked in a range of genres from documentary, experimental film, satire, portraiture and visual art. In 2006 he gained international prominence when his photographs were featured alongside other select Australian indigenous artists at the new Musée du quai Branly in Paris. In the same year, the National Gallery of Australia held a major retrospective which the book "Sights Unseen" catalogues.

Tragically, Riley missed the hoopla. He had died two years earlier from renal failure at the age of forty-four. The publishing of this book at this time of high-achievement and raw-loss clearly offered contributors an opportunity for eulogizing, for historicizing, claiming friendships, and otherwise affirming a gentle, watchful, mischievous, and deeply talented man. Many of the friends who posed for him, or collaborated with him on film and television projects, are now leading figures in the indigenous arts establishment—and many of them have contributed essays and personal notes for the book. Linda Burney's moving introduction sets the tone for the volume. Short pieces follow by influential figures such as Hetti Perkins, Rachel Perkins, Frances Peters-Little, Warwick Thornton and Beck Cole, Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon, intermixed with reflections by less well-known members of the indigenous community. Almost everyone in the book speaks of Riley's gift as an observer: how his images offer an enticement to look further, to see more. They tell of a man of contradictions: a quiet, observant man, a 'conversational minimalist' who loved gossip (Fraser p. 108). Even in the more formal essays by Djon Mundine, Gael Newton, Anthony 'Ace' Bourke, and Nikos Papastergiadis personal reminiscences provide key elements of tone and narrative drive. This, it seems to me, is a particularly indigenous way of celebrating, remembering and affirming relationships.

Clearly too, there is a deliberate politics to this. Brenda L. Croft, the curator of the NGA exhibition, explicitly positions Riley's untimely death within a broader social history, describing it as the direct 'after-effects of childhood poverty—the fate of too many indigenous people in Australia, a First-world country where the majority of indigenous people continue to live in Third-World poverty' (p.17). Croft

goes on to describe how the book has been arranged chronologically in order to track the deepening of Riley's work from portraits of Aboriginal subjects, through his work on documentary and other broadcast and film projects, to his most celebrated and widely recognised achievements, namely the celebrated *Sacrifice* and *cloud* series of photographs. Arguing that Riley 'drew on the collective experiences of millennia' (p.17) Croft describes how these photographs 'resonate with loss, experienced not only by the individual but by entire Indigenous communities: 'loss' of culture and land in enforced, and sometimes embraced, 'exchange' for Christianity.' (p.41).

Riley himself also specifically figured his project in relationship to ethnography, although his notion of this extended beyond the anthropological or scholarly purview as illustrated in this quote from the National Gallery of Australia's website.

I want to get away from the ethnographic image of Aboriginal people in magazines. A lot of images you see...are like Aboriginal people living in humpies, or drunk on the street or...marching in protests. There's nothing wrong with that, but I want to...show young Aboriginal people in the cities today; a lot of them [are] very sophisticated and [a] lot of them very glamorous. A lot of them have been around the world and have an air of sophistication which you don't see coming across in newspapers and [television] programs. I'm just talking about positive things really, positive images of Aboriginal people.

While positive images are all-too-often the realm of cliché and fabrication, Riley's 'positive images' of his Aboriginal friends and family are original, eloquent and compelling. A quiet lustre gleams from within his subjects, a quality of openness and complexity fills the frame which, in turn, calls for—enables?—a particular kind of attention from the viewer. For anthropologists with their own investments in the visual, these images make manifestly clear that an observational disposition doesn't necessarily equate to detachment, scrutinization and other ocular forms of violence and appropriation. Indeed, these photos demand an analysis that moves away from a discourse of the gaze towards an alternative notion of the kinds of relationships and understandings that can be mediated by the camera. Thus while Croft understands Riley's work to be about contradiction and conflict—'not only the contradictions between indigenous and non-indigenous experience, but also the contradictions that indigenous people face in determining where they see home, especially those of us who have grown up in fractured cultural experiences and traditions' (p. 41)—I would argue that in the process of addressing these themes, the work actually enables and even refigures certain kinds of relationships. Papastergiadis captures this quality in a thoughtful essay that is perhaps the most attentive to the work rather than the artist, (although here too a fondness for the man, and his sense that it

is the qualities of the man, such as his meekness, that imbues Riley's relationships with his subjects and images, is central to the analysis). Describing the exhibition *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murriës* as 'the most remarkable portraits of a community that I have ever witnessed', Papastergiadis explores the ways that Riley's work avoids the bluntness of stereotype (and its negation) by recounting his own first encounter with these images and the ways that this generated a profoundly affecting experience of 'coming closer and closer to a group of people who understood hospitality and hardship' (p.67-8).

Part of what is valuable about this catalogue (and which was, of course, even more pronounced in the exhibition itself where one could not only watch the films, but spend time with the images in scale) is the sense you gain not only of Riley's maturing as an artist, but of his energy for experimentation in style, form and content. The early shots of family and friends give way to work that is more experimental, more overtly artistic in ambition. Pointing to the conceptual shifts manifest in the *Sacrifice* photographs, Croft describes how this work allowed Riley a '...crossing into the ethereal, bringing his fascination with Christianity and symbolism to the fore, and letting any overt Indigenous reference sink into the layering effect of a potent body of work. There is a timelessness in the images or, perhaps, a hint of the earliest representations of the photographic process, a tinge of gothic gloom and universality that could place them as being from *anywhere*. Yet they are rooted in the Aboriginal history of this country' (p.38).

In his discussion of the final, and rightly famous, *cloud* series, Mundine describes how by that stage of his life Riley had allowed his work to become 'more personal' and 'more free' and, even less overtly Aboriginal in his themes (p.126). Positioning the imagery evocatively in terms of childhood memory, of dreams and release, Mundine gestures towards the ways that these later works invite an encounter in which the uncanny, the disturbing, and the spiritual bring a different tone to the political and social dimensions of Riley's imagery. If there is a weakness to this book for me it is in the way that the more scholarly discussions largely fail to take the discussion of aesthetics further in this direction. As I

turned from image to text, I wanted more of the writers to be willing to untether their analysis from the personal and social locations of their making and circulation and to discuss the power of the images on their own terms. For, it seems to me that Riley had developed a sensibility that far exceeded the discursive frameworks that surrounded him—and indeed informed his project. The references to identity politics and other manifestations of 'postcolonial struggle' (and here I continue to struggle for a more appropriate term) invoked to explain and contextualise the work felt inadequate to the complexity and potency of the images themselves.

Yet on second thoughts, I wonder if it is exactly the relational aesthetics that I see operating in Riley's images that are being deliberately activated by the texts and their arrangement in the book. The fondly told stories, resonant with the pain of loss, profoundly enhance the relational qualities that are inherent to Riley's visual work, enabling those of us outside the photographic moment and the encompassing social scene to glimpse layers of meaning otherwise unavailable. Could this be reason for the seeming refusal to abstract or otherwise theorise the work? The tone of tenderness and deep regard in these essays that echoes in the images themselves: images that resonate with intimacies of lives themselves intimate with struggle and suffering. The resulting effects are inclusive, allowing and affecting; they invite viewers, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to look and know in a way that, as Riley intended, is profoundly different to that of the ethnographic or popular media.

In that sense then, I wonder if the 'sights unseen' on offer within the covers of this publication become further available to the reader/viewer because of the way that the texts and images work together: the way the stories of shared histories, places and loss enhance and affirm the significances of the spaces opened up in the oscillations between the subject and their photographer, the viewed and the viewer, the word and image, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead, in ways that manifest the material and always-earth-bound qualities of the numinous for Aboriginal people.

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